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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SOFIA 000651

SIPDIS

FOR THE SECRETARY

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ENRG](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR BULGARIAN FOREIGN MINISTER'S VISIT  
TO WASHINGTON

REF: SOFIA 0499

Classified By: CDA Susan Sutton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Foreign Minister Rumiana Zheleva seeks to put a new face on Bulgaria when she visits Washington November 23. Conducting the most high-profile U.S. visit of PM Borissov's government so far, Zheleva will be single-minded about convincing you that the government she represents is the real deal. Having just marked its 100th day in office, the new government has demonstrated impressive political will and determination to attack endemic corruption, restore public (and Brussels') confidence, and conduct a U.S.- friendly foreign and security policy. Zheleva will detail the new government's attempts to improve the rule of law, lessen Russian influence in the energy sector, and deepen the U.S.-Bulgarian security partnership. She will lobby for a White House meeting for PM Borissov and stress the importance of future visa-free travel for Bulgarians. The new government sees your meeting as an important sign of support for its anti-corruption, pro-west policies. End Summary.

RULE OF LAW PROGRESS: JOB ONE

¶2. (C) Job number one for PM Borissov's government has been rooting out the endemic corruption and influence of organized crime that has soured the EU on its newest member and sapped public confidence in successive governments. Since taking office in July, the government has taken concrete steps against organized crime and corruption. Already, one former minister and one deputy minister have been indicted and two more former ministers have been stripped of immunity. The government must avoid the appearance of seeking political payback rather than justice, and it must make more progress quickly against the brazen influence of organized crime figures. There is still a long way to go, but the Borissov government is off to an impressive start.

SEEKING TO LESSEN RUSSIAN ENERGY INFLUENCE...

¶3. (C) The new government is focused on breaking Russia's stranglehold of the Bulgarian energy sector and it seeks stronger support from the United States to balance the steady pressure from Moscow. The goals are increased national security, improved transparency and a better deal for Bulgarian consumers. Russia has fought to maintain its privileged position and, given its near monopoly in the Bulgarian gas sector and its successful courting of other European partners, it has the upper hand. The Bulgarians are standing up for themselves. They have decided to pull the plug, at least for now, on the corruption-plagued,

Russian-built Belene Nuclear Power Plant and they are still weighing their options on other majority-Russian owned projects. With so many European countries already signed on to South Stream, the Bulgarians will not back out now, but neither will they be the project's cheerleaders. Nabucco is central to this government's diversification strategy, as are neighborhood interconnector projects. Bulgaria is also considering a first-of-its-kind gas transit transparency project in cooperation with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and the World Bank. Russian and domestic energy lobby pressure to go back to business as usual is intense. The government will use your discussion with Zheleva on the need for diversification and transparency as political cover to resist Russian bullying and continue the overhaul and reform of its energy sector.

...WHILE DEEPENING U.S.-BULGARIAN SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

14. (C) The new government has stressed that the United States is its preeminent security partner and it is eager to deepen our relationship. Despite increasingly tight budgets, the Borissov government pledges to maintain its troop levels in Afghanistan and plans to gradually add and consolidate troops in the Kandahar region. Sofia is ready to assist us in developing our missile defense architecture and is waiting to hear whether we have a specific role in mind for Bulgaria. Sofia has signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement allowing the permanent stationing of up to 2,500 U.S. service members at joint training facilities. The new government wants to maximize the utility of these facilities and has suggested hosting NATO training events or inviting regional NATO and EU

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aspirant countries to train together in Bulgaria.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS WILL BE KEY

15. (C) Zheleva has two "must-do's" on her Washington list: securing a date for a White House meeting for Prime Minister Borissov and seeking progress on visa waiver. She will come home empty-handed on both, and will need face-saving messages to carry back to Sofia. The Prime Minister told us his top foreign travel priority is a meeting with the President: the PM, and the public, see such a meeting as a crucial validation of the Borissov government's pro-West, pro-reform policies. On the visa waiver, despite repeated explanations of the legal qualifications for the program, the government and the media continue to believe that inclusion is primarily a political decision and a reward for Bulgaria's unwavering support on controversial U.S. foreign policy issues, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kosovo independence. Your recognition of U.S. support for Bulgaria's eventual inclusion into Visa Waiver, once it meets technical requirements, will soften the blow.

16. (C) Comment: Zheleva is an ambitious leader on the rise. Nominated to become Bulgaria's next EU Commissioner, she says she will go to Brussels only if offered a high-profile, foreign policy-related portfolio such as a combined Enlargement/neighborhood policy billet. Zheleva is sharp, dynamic and inspires extreme loyalty in those who work for and with her. She is also a neophyte in foreign policy issues and her lack of experience and perspective sometimes shows. Nonetheless, she is committed to making Bulgaria a respected and responsive member of the EU, and a strong partner for us.

SUTTON